



Sacred Disagreement: Jewish Summer Camping and the Future of Jewish Peoplehood

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One of the unintended consequences of a crisis is that communities often become more concerned with defining who belongs and who does not. This is a depressing takeaway from our post-October 7 moment, but the phenomenon predates it. Well before the Hamas massacre, gatekeeping had become a preoccupation of legacy Jewish organizations and self-appointed authorities. In 2021, Natan Sharansky and Gil Troy took to the pages of *Tablet* to call out Jewish progressive critics of Israel as “un-Jews,” irrespective of their religious and cultural commitments, in the name of Jewish peoplehood. “Woke” anti-Zionists, they contended, were “denying the essence of Jewish peoplehood” by rejecting the “broad Zionist consensus the Jewish world developed after the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel.” Since October 7, the ADL has broadened its definition of antisemitism to include anti-Zionist activism, even — and perhaps especially — when organized by self-identified Jewish organizations. The demand, increasingly, is not merely for solidarity in the face of shared threat, but for ideological conformity as the price of belonging.

Zionism as a Litmus Test

There is a deep irony in this move. As historian Noam Pianko demonstrates, the very term “Jewish peoplehood” was popularized by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan in the postwar period precisely to *avoid* the connotations of Zionism and nationalism. Kaplan was a fierce opponent of the blood-and-soil nationalism that had bequeathed humanity two catastrophic world wars. He turned to “peoplehood” to capture a sense of shared Jewish connection not circumscribed by borders, political ideology, national chauvinism, or religious dogma. He expected the Jewish state and its citizens to play an integral role in the Jewish collective, but he regarded the nature and character of that state as legitimate fodder for intra-Jewish discussion and debate. Deploying Kaplan’s coinage as a weapon against critics of Israeli policy is not merely intellectually dishonest; it inverts the concept’s original purpose. Like it or not, the Jewish people is not entombed in amber.

If peoplehood was constructed to serve a particular vision of collective life, it can be reconstructed to serve a better one.

What might that better vision look like? The most compelling philosophical account comes from Hannah Arendt, a Jewish thinker whose own fraught relationship to collective life gave her particular insight into the dangers of coercive solidarity. For Arendt, genuine community is grounded not in unanimity, but in what she called plurality: the condition of being simultaneously equal and distinct. Plurality is not an obstacle to be managed or minimized. It is the precondition of genuine political existence. A community that suppresses internal difference in the name of unity does not achieve solidarity, but rather conformity — a diminished and ultimately brittle substitute.

Jewish Peoplehood in an American Context

This insight carries special force in the American Jewish context. The encounter with America shaped an American Jewish community characterized by conditions that anthropologist Mary Douglas understood as constitutive of “low group, low grid” societies: individualism, weak centralized authority, fluid external boundaries and deep-seated preference for personal autonomy over ideological discipline, which have characterized American Jewish life for two centuries. A conception of peoplehood that demands conformity as the price of belonging is not just philosophically wrong. In the American context, it is sociologically unworkable.

The Jewish tradition has its own name for what Arendt describes. *Machloket l'shem shamayim* (argument for the sake of heaven) is not merely a slogan but a structural commitment to keeping dissent alive within the community. The Talmud preserves minority opinions even when they are overruled. Beit Hillel’s practice of teaching Beit Shammai’s positions alongside its own, often first, was an expression of intellectual humility grounded in the recognition that disagreement is not a threat to the community’s integrity but evidence of its vitality.

So, what does a Jewish peoplehood committed to plurality and *machloket* look like institutionally? One possible model is what philosopher Jen Glaser calls “substantive pluralism,” where diversity is treated neither as a cause for uncritical celebration nor as a grudging concession to reality, but rather as an invitation for respectful dialogue and investigation of points of commonality, as well as difference. Substantive pluralism is grounded not in ideology, but what sociologist Riv-Ellen Prell describes as “a common vocabulary and symbols to articulate a shared past” — a cultural grammar that makes it possible for Jews to speak to one another across their differences. Jews have experimented successfully with educational environments modeled on substantive pluralism as applied to religious life.

Pianko offers a useful alternative framework. Think of the Jewish people not as an organism with a center and a periphery but as a collection of loosely federated neighborhoods (e.g., the American Jewish neighborhood, the Israeli Jewish neighborhood, the French Jewish neighborhood, etc.). Real neighborhoods have distinct geographies, local flavors, and traditions. They do not require every household to be identical or demand ideological uniformity as the price of residence. As Pianko writes, the neighborhood model treats local engagement and individual experience as “the building blocks of Jewish peoplehood” — “the sum of divergent processes of Jewish exploration and community building.” Unlike substantive pluralism, the neighborhood model provides ample space to solidify one’s own normative commitments, values, and beliefs before entering into dialogue with others. But here, too, communication across differences to ensure cohesion is essential, although it typically occurs within and between neighborhoods, rather than within individual houses.

Enter Jewish Summer Camps

Jewish summer camps are among the most natural institutional homes for this vision. The earliest American Jewish camps were either privately-owned playgrounds for the wealthy or community-sponsored institutions designed to Americanize the children of the immigrant poor. But between the world wars, camp became a cradle of Jewish cultural invigoration and ideological formation. Labor Zionists, General Zionists, Yiddish Socialists, Yiddish Culturalists, and other groups ran their own networks of camps, immersive environments where children and staff were steeped in a distinct language, set of values, and vision of Jewish life. By the 1940s and 50s, religious denominations added their own camps to the landscape. The sector was never ideologically uniform, because it was never designed to be. Each camp was a distinctive household in a broader Jewish neighborhood. Over 40% of Jewish summer camps are affiliated with a religious denomination or Zionist movement. Ideological formation at the micro level and pluralism at the macro level are not opposites. They are, and have always been, complementary features of the same ecosystem.

The structural features of camp make it an equally promising venue for substantive pluralism as it is for ideological inculcation. Camp is immersive and child-centered, cut off from the regular world, with its own rituals, culture, and traditions. The cabin environment generates intense peer bonding and counselors function as surrogate older siblings and role models. It is, in the best sense, a laboratory where people learn to cooperate and identify commonalities that transcend their differences. One can imagine a camp where disagreements about whether a Jewish state can be a democracy of all its people are treated with the same spirit of curiosity and good faith that the best religiously pluralistic camps already bring to theological disagreements about God,

halakha, or gender in Jewish life. But camp can also operate as a cohesive household within a wider neighborhood, a controlled environment, and thus an ideal venue where ideologically partisan identities can be molded, performed, and internalized.

Conclusion

Post-October 7, some camps have faced demands from families, donors, and communal organizations to enforce consensus on Israel and silence dissenting voices. But compliance carries a cost, not merely a political one but a cost to a model of collective life. Not every camp can or should aspire to substantive pluralism; many are born of deep ideological commitments that preclude it. For these camps, the neighborhood paradigm remains the more realistic framework: each camp a distinct household, practicing its own particular Judaism, but committed to a shared cultural language and a basic respect for the legitimacy of other households on the block. The two models are not rivals. They are different points on a spectrum, and the health of the ecosystem depends on having both.

In the final analysis, the health of Jewish peoplehood may depend less on whether Jews agree about Israel than on whether they can remain in genuine community with one another across that disagreement. Jewish camping, at its best, has always known how to do that. The task now is to choose it.

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